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Sustainable development: implementation of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly in Africa

Status of preparations for the International Year of Deserts and Desertification, 2006

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The General Assembly, concerned over the exacerbation of desertification, particularly in Africa, and its far-reaching implications for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, in particular on poverty eradication, adopted at its fifty-eighth session resolution 58/211, which declared 2006 the International Year of Deserts and Desertification. The resolution was adopted as a means of raising public awareness of the issue of desertification and of protecting the biological diversity, knowledge and traditions of those communities affected by desertification.

In paragraph 6 of its resolution 58/211, the General Assembly also requested the Secretary-General to report to it at its sixtieth session on the status of preparations for the Year.

The present report is being submitted as a follow-up to that specific request and provides information on the steps taken by the Executive Secretary of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, as designated focal point for the International Year of Deserts and Desertification, for the implementation of resolution 58/211. It also describes the objectives identified for the International Year and the coordination and cooperation initiatives with institutional partners and parties to the Convention.

The last part of the present report contains conclusions and recommendations to the General Assembly to ensure the success of the International Year.

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I. Background

1. The twenty-second session of the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme/Global Ministerial Environment Forum, recalling the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly in Africa, the Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development and the environment initiative of the New Partnership for Africa's Development, adopted decision 22/15 inviting the General Assembly to consider declaring an international year of deserts and desertification as soon as possible.

2. At its fifty-eighth session the General Assembly adopted resolution 58/211, which declared 2006 the International Year of Deserts and Desertification. In doing so, the General Assembly underlined its deep concern over the exacerbation of desertification, particularly in Africa, and duly noted its far-reaching implications for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, in particular those relating to poverty eradication.

3. In the resolution the General Assembly called upon Governments to contribute to the activities of the Year and was aimed at raising public awareness of the issue with a view to protecting the biological diversity of deserts as well as the traditional knowledge of those communities affected by desertification. It also:

(a) Invited all countries to establish national committees or focal points and to celebrate the Year by arranging appropriate activities;

(b) Designated the Executive Secretary of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly in Africa, as focal point of the Year, in conjunction with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and other relevant bodies of the United Nations;

(c) Encouraged countries to contribute, as they are able, to the Convention and to undertake special initiatives in observance of the Year with the goal of enhancing the implementation of the Convention;

(d) Called upon all relevant international organizations and Member States to support the activities related to desertification, including land degradation, to be organized by affected countries, in particular African and least developed countries.

II. Lines of action

4. The International Year of Deserts and Desertification, 2006 will coincide with the tenth anniversary of the entry into force of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification. The Convention, adopted in Paris on 17 June 1994 and opened for signature at the same venue on 14 and 15 October 1994, entered into force on 26 December 1996, 90 days after the fiftieth ratification was received. To this day, the Convention counts 191 parties, making it one of the most representative instruments of the Rio generation.

5. Within such a perspective, the International Year of Deserts and Desertification constitutes an opportunity to strengthen the visibility and importance

of the drylands issue on the international environmental agenda. In that regard, it is a unique opportunity to bring across the message of the people of the drylands while underlining the daily plight and commitment of these communities to the objectives of sustainable development. It also draws the attention of the international community towards the great challenges that still lay ahead in this strategic field, and increases the momentum of the Convention process, by raising its public profile, promoting the role and comparative advantages of its parties and institutional partners.

6. With a view to fully capitalizing on the expected momentum to be generated by the International Year of Deserts and Desertification, its conception, launching and celebration are being engineered around the promotion of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification process and the complementary advantages of its multilateral and bilateral partners. In this context, it is expected that the Year will lead to the achievement of a set of concrete and measurable objectives:

(a) *Long-term oriented implementation of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification* through the promotion of targeted local, national and international events with the aim of facilitating the implementation of the Convention, while also raising awareness about desertification and focusing attention on the way States parties, local communities and individuals contribute to combat desertification. The Bonn Declaration requested States parties to make all necessary arrangements to ensure that the elaboration of the action programmes was finalized by the end of 2005. The year 2006 could then be used as the starting line for broad implementation of those programmes worldwide. The momentum generated by the International Year could be of paramount importance for the implementation process of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, creating a multiplier effect at the national and international levels. Partnership agreements and donor round tables could be scheduled during the Year for the launching of the implementation of the action programmes. Building upon the dynamic of the Global Compact Initiative, the private sector could be further involved in the process through strategic financial support to targeted areas of interest;

(b) *Awareness of desertification implications*, by profiling desertification as a major threat to vulnerable ecosystems and to mankind, reinforced by the scenarios of climate change and loss of biological diversity, with due emphasis on the relationship with food insecurity, poverty, migration and conflicts in the context of the Millennium Development Goals;

(c) *Networking with all stakeholders*, by encouraging the mobilization of a broad and innovative international partnership to combat land degradation and desertification through patronage and partnerships with States parties, national and international organizations, civil society, academic institutions and the business community. The General Assembly, by designating the Executive Secretary of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification as focal point of the Year, in conjunction with UNEP, UNDP, IFAD and other relevant bodies of the United Nations, clearly indicated the need for partnership in the implementation of the Convention. Accordingly, it builds upon the Convention mandate for partnership and collaboration with the United Nations in the implementation of the Convention to ensure that the International Year of Deserts and Desertification is a success. Additionally, and in accordance with General Assembly resolution 58/211, the

secretariat of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification will assist the 191 parties to the Convention to establish national committees, which will be in charge of coordinating the celebration of the International Year of Deserts and Desertification at the national level. The objective of the national committees will be to prepare, implement and follow up relevant year activities in their countries. The way in which the committees operate will be decided at the country level. The Convention secretariat could assist by preparing guidelines for committee establishment, with suggestions on their composition and work. The committees could be constituted by non-governmental or community-based organizations, scientific institutions and the public sector so as to ensure representation for all stakeholders, prevent duplication of the activities proposed and help to broaden the circulation of information;

(d) *Dissemination of information* related to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, by focusing attention on human activities that spread desertification throughout all regions of the planet, fine-tuning the message to also address emerging fields of interest and potential consequences that go beyond traditional focus fields (such as poverty and hunger, social unrest, political instability, conflict or mass migrations), and providing elements on effective ways to counter fatalistic perceptions. In such a context, emphasize the economic importance of ecosystem services in the drylands and promote best practices and disseminate information through all possible channels.

7. For that purpose, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification is planning to launch a dedicated "Year 2006" website expected to be set up well in advance of 2006 and run from the website of the Convention secretariat. However, simply establishing one website as a resource base will not provide the necessary technical support required by journalists worldwide. While the project will be aimed at establishing a web-based information centre and database, it will nevertheless need to strengthen the networks of journalists and other relevant information providers.

8. At the end of the Year, it is expected that a large network of environmental journalists in both developed and developing countries will have a better understanding of the global relevance of desertification. Furthermore, it is also expected that target groups, including government representatives, non-governmental organizations, local communities and the general public will be benefiting from the dissemination and sharing of a growing array of best practices and lessons learned through a variety of media channels.

III. Status of preparation

9. Following the declaration of the International Year of Deserts and Desertification by the General Assembly on 23 December 2003, the Executive Secretary of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, in his capacity as designated focal point of the Year, has given priority to the coordination of international and national initiatives with potential partners to ensure for the timely preparation and successful celebration of the Year.

A. International

10. With a view to defining a common strategy for the celebration of the Year and to take full advantage of the unique comparative advantages and expertise of the United Nations system, an inter-agency committee has been constituted, bringing together the principal institutional partners of the United Nations active in the Convention implementation process (UNEP, UNDP, IFAD, the World Bank, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Volunteers, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and others), including those specifically designated by resolution 58/211.

11. A tentative list of activities has been drawn up by the inter-agency committee for the commemoration of the International Year (see annex). (For specific budget figures and further information on each one of the activities, refer to United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification document ICCD/COP(7)/2.Add.2.) The activities identified essentially concern the fields of media, culture and communication, with a view to launching an ambitious information and awareness-raising campaign aimed at the international general public and decision makers.

B. Other activities at the international level

12. In addition to the activities jointly planned and scheduled by the inter-agency committee, partner international organizations have also provided for the organization of specific initiatives identified and devised on the basis of their respective fields of expertise and mandates.

13. In this regard, and upon a request by the Executive Secretary of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, the Council of the Universal Postal Union (UPU) has adopted and sent a circular to national postal administrations worldwide, encouraging the production of stamps for the promotion and commemoration of the International Year of Deserts and Desertification. A similar request has been addressed to the United Nations Postal Administration for the production of a series of stamps portraying the two issues at stake: deserts and desertification.

14. In addition, UNEP is planning to launch two publications on the occasion of 2006. The first, entitled Global Environmental Outlook for Deserts report (GEO-Deserts), is scheduled to be published on the occasion of the World Environment and World Desertification Days, respectively 5 and 17 June 2006. A second publication highlighting UNEP activities in dryland environmental management is to be launched in September or October 2006. Furthermore, UNEP is planning a scientific conference on the theme "Dryland environmental management and the Millennium Development Goals", expected to be held at UNEP headquarters in Nairobi, in September/October 2006.

15. UNESCO, in collaboration with the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification secretariat and a group of partner agencies (FAO, UNDP, UNEP, IFAD, the United Nations University (UNU), the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), GEF, the Sahara and Sahel Observatory, the International Council for Science

among others) is planning an international scientific conference, entitled The Future of Drylands. The conference, tentatively scheduled to be held in Tunis at the end of June 2006, will endeavour to take stock of 50 years of experience in dryland studies, policies and development programmes and to redefine future priorities to promote sustainable development in the world's drylands. A call for papers will be launched soon and it is hoped that a number of experts of affected States parties will be able to attend the conference.

16. Based on the success of the first edition of the UNESCO-United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification education kit on combating desertification, which was widely distributed to primary schools in desertification-affected countries, UNESCO expects, in cooperation with the Convention secretariat, to finalize a new edition of the kit. The new kit, labelled "A creative approach to environmental education in drylands and highlands", will be targeted at primary and secondary schools in dryland and mountainous countries.

17. The Convention on Biological Diversity, based on the programme of work on the biodiversity of dry and sub-humid lands, will collaborate with the secretariats of United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to organize in 2006 regional synergy workshops in Asia or Latin America and the Caribbean to implement the programmes of work on dry and sub-humid lands and agricultural biodiversity.

18. UNDP will put in place a process for communicating information on the International Year of Deserts and Desertification to UNDP resident representatives to encourage active country-level participation during the celebration of the World Day to Combat Desertification and support advocacy efforts for hunger and poverty eradication in the drylands. UNDP will also support a number of countries celebrating the World Day to Combat Desertification by raising the profile of the events in each country and publicizing the overall effort globally. UNDP is also preparing a paper entitled "Achieving the Millennium Development Goals in the drylands".

19. In 2006, FAO will implement the Land Degradation Assessment in Drylands programme, which will provide and disseminate a number of information and awareness documents. In addition, FAO has started to promote the forestry dialogue in eastern, southern and western parts of Africa in collaboration with subregional organizations.

20. The International Fund for Agricultural Development has established an interdepartmental working group to develop a communication plan with the aim of enhancing the objectives of the International Year of Deserts and Desertification. In collaboration with the Global Mechanism, it will prepare a showcasing of IFAD activities, with particular emphasis on women and desertification. IFAD will also prepare a document on the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification to draw lessons from relevant country and project case studies to facilitate mainstreaming of the objectives of the Convention.

21. In addition to the coordination role assigned to it by resolution 58/211, the Executive Secretary of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification has identified core activities to be promoted and launched by its secretariat for 2006:

(a) Preparation of promotional publications and memorabilia, including new information products to be available in all six United Nations languages (2006 booklet, flyers, International Year of Deserts and Desertification press kit, poster campaign, etc.);

(b) Television and radio clips, films, documentaries and interviews on deserts and desertification. The International Year of Deserts and Desertification lends itself to the launching of a whole series of documentary programmes on desertification that could be produced and broadcast by major international media organizations and networks;

(c) Establishment of a dedicated website with contact information, a list of activities and events, guidelines, contact details and other issues related to the Year;

(d) A photo competition launched by the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification to promote the International Year of Deserts and Desertification in 2006. A jury of eminent personalities will select the three photographs that conceptually and artistically best depict the problem of land degradation. The project was made possible thanks to the generous support of Hewlett Packard, the World Bank, TerrAfrica, the International Fertilizer Industry Association, Landgraedsla rikisins, the World Overview of Conservation Approaches and Technologies and Entico Corporation Ltd.;

(e) Logo competition. In March 2005, the United Nations agencies involved in the preparation and celebration of the 2006 International Year of Deserts and Desertification decided to organize a logo competition as the best way to identify the most suitable image to portray the message of the Year. One month after the opening of the competition to the general public, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification secretariat had received nearly 700 entries for the contest, a number far exceeding expectations. Submissions came from all over the world and were sent by people with different backgrounds, including graphic designers, students, artists and non-governmental organization representatives. After an arduous review of all entries and a selection process involving the members of the inter-agency cluster, the winning logo was unveiled in Bonn during the third session of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention. Its design and overall conception was found to best depict the issue at stake and convey the message of the United Nations for the International Year of Deserts and Desertification.

22. In addition to the above-mentioned international organizations, several countries and regional authorities have already shown their interest in organizing international events for the celebration of 2006.

23. The Government of Spain indicated its willingness to consider exploring ways and means of organizing a seminar on migration and desertification. Building upon the successful International Symposium on Desertification and Migrations, jointly organized in 1995 by the Government of Spain and the secretariat of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, such a seminar would seek to address the extremely important links between land degradation, poverty and migration, the latter being one of the most visible and relevant consequences of desertification.

24. In the same framework, the Government of Italy has positively responded to the General Assembly call by supporting the Convention secretariat in the

organization of an international film festival on deserts and desertification, entitled Desert Nights. The festival will attempt to raise the awareness of the general public about the issue of desertification and its social and cultural implications, promote cultural identities and local capacities of dryland communities, and identify and launch concrete actions in support of affected developing countries, particularly in the field of arts and culture. The movies presented at the international film festival will portray day-to-day life in the drylands.

25. Regarding the involvement of regional authorities, the government of Bavaria has planned to organize in Rosenheim (Germany), from March to October 2006, a major archeological and cultural exhibition on the world's deserts, portraying their origin and changing face over thousands of years. Adopting an interactive approach, the exhibit will portray the unique fauna and flora of desert ecosystems, as well as the adaptation strategies developed by their respective communities.

C. Honorary spokespersons for the International Year of Deserts and Desertification

26. To ensure a high international profile for the International Year of Deserts and Desertification and the indispensable public and media visibility required for its successful promotion worldwide, the Convention secretariat has explored the possibility of associating internationally recognized figures with the Year.

27. In this context, and after consultations with the Office of the Secretary-General, Wangari Maathai, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate for 2004 and Deputy Minister of Environment of Kenya, and Cherif Rahmani, Minister of Environment of Algeria, have been named honorary spokespersons for the International Year of Deserts and Desertification.

28. The Convention secretariat is currently exploring the possibility of associating other celebrities with the Year. Aware of the singular impact that people drawn from the fields of culture and entertainment may also have on public opinion, its efforts are currently focusing on those specific areas.

D. National

29. The Executive Secretary of the Convention contacted all parties to inform them of the decision taken by the General Assembly and requesting information on the ways and means envisaged at the national level for the celebration of the International Year. At the same time, States parties were encouraged to take the necessary steps required to provide high visibility to the activities forming part of the celebration of the Year and, in doing so, ensure the greatest possible impact at the national, regional and international levels. In this regard, a letter containing a questionnaire was sent to all parties to identify the person or institution that would be responsible for coordinating these activities at the national level.

30. Pursuant to paragraph 19 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1980/67 relating to procedures for organizing the celebration of international years and anniversaries, the letter indicated that provisions should be made for national committees to be set up to prepare for, conduct and follow up on the International Year, in close cooperation with the secretariat of the United Nations Convention to

Combat Desertification. In this context and in order to fully build upon the comparative advantage of the Convention implementation process at the national level, the secretariat encouraged parties, when applicable, to consider entrusting their respective national committees on desertification with this task.

31. To date, the secretariat of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification has received 20 confirmations from parties in that regard. The secretariat understands that parties are still in the process of internal consultations and believes that the remaining confirmations will be received in due course. The activities envisaged by the countries that have replied to the request include a wide range of areas of interest and events that would certainly help in raising the visibility of the International Year nationally. These events can be grouped as follows:

(a) Conferences, workshops and seminars (academic lectures, scientific meetings, press conferences);

(b) Cultural events (museum exhibitions, musical events, film festivals);

(c) Awareness-raising activities (production of materials, commemorative coins and stamps, organization of campaigns and competitions).

32. A compilation of these activities, together with their scheduled timing, will be made available online to facilitate the exchange of information among countries and allow for replication.

IV. Conclusions and recommendations

33. A large number of partners have already confirmed their willingness to extend their cooperation and partnership for the successful celebration of the International Year of Deserts and Desertification.

34. At the international level, and through the active involvement of those agencies identified by resolution 58/211 as well as the other international institutions active in the Convention implementation process, a promising tentative schedule of activities has been agreed upon. At the national level, after a period of consultations and information, encouraging feedback has started to reach the Convention secretariat, with several countries indicating their interest in playing an important role in the celebration of the Year.

35. However, more active support and a more timely response from the States parties would be highly appreciated, given the limited time available. Furthermore, due to the additional workload generated by the organization of the International Year of Deserts and Desertification, all estimated additional costs required for the coordination and celebration of the Year have been proposed as extrabudgetary activities and accordingly included in the supplementary fund document of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (ICCD/COP(7)/2.Add.2).

36. The General Assembly may wish therefore to encourage States parties to contribute to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification Special Fund in order to ensure the fulfilment of resolution 58/211.

Annex

Tentative list of activities envisaged for the celebration of the International Year of Deserts and Desertification

2005

October	– COP 7
	– Organization of side event on the International Year of Deserts and Desertification
October/November	– Presentation of report of the Secretary-General on the status of preparation for the International Year of Deserts and Desertification
	– Briefing of the regional groups of the United Nations
	– Organization of side event on the International Year of Deserts and Desertification
	– Joint reception in the Delegates' Dining Room
November	Organization of a special trip for international journalists to the Sahara region as prelude to a series of articles on the International Year of Deserts and Desertification
November/December	– Editing and printing of specialized publications on the International Year of Deserts and Desertification
	– Production of memorabilia articles for the International Year of Deserts and Desertification

2006

January	– Launching of the programme of celebration of the Year in each country.
	– Launching of national commemorative stamps
January/February	Production of advertising inserts and television commercials.
February	Assessment and review of implementation of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification at the global level. Event: Global meeting. Location: Argentina.
February	Youth and the Environment: Lessons and Perspectives in Africa. Africa meeting. Mali.
March	Launching of specialized training seminars on environmental journalism.
April	Women and Desertification. Assessing the role of women in the implementation of the Convention. Event: Global meeting. Location: China.

May	Launching in Rome of the film festival Desert Nights
June (early)	– High-level conference in Algiers on the protection of deserts and combating desertification – Inauguration of the Observatoire de l'Environnement et de la Lutte contre la Désertification of the museum of the Institut international des déserts in Ghardaïa, Algeria
5 June	Celebration of World Environment Day
17 June	World Day to Combat Desertification: major media event, organized in Algiers with the presence of Kofi Annan and Wangari Mathai
June (end)	UNESCO conference, The Future of Arid Lands
September	Launching of the cultural exposition Drylands 2006 at the Kunst Halle Museum in Bonn
October	Presentation of the report to the Secretary-General in the General Assembly by Cherif Rahmani and Wangari Mathai